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Education by Inspiration, Invitation and Experience

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“The kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch. “ (Eisner, 1982, 49)

I met Elliot in September 1982. It was a meeting that changed the course of my life. I was new in the US, having left a position as a musical director at the Tel-Aviv Museum in Israel to join Yoram, my husband, a doctoral student in engineering. I was at a crossroads: With the established and gratifying music path obstructed, life was vacant and open, terrifyingly so. As fate had it, a friend took me to a doctoral seminar on aesthetic education: Monday evening in September, 7-10 PM, a generic room in old fashioned Cubberley. Not knowing anything about education as a field of study, I did not know who Elliot Eisner was (before Google-time, it did not dawn on me to search). But the class, a seminar on aesthetic education, was highly engaging. There was this distinct sense, not common in schooling, of tangible flowing energy that felt wonderfully appealing. This was unexpected; I had taken several courses on Aesthetics as an undergraduate in Philosophy at Tel-Aviv University. Having read some classical aestheticians I was turned off by the field; it did not seem relevant to my practices as a pianist, nor did it add to my understanding of the arts and the experiences they evoked.

However, Elliot's class was vibrant. The ideas had vitality. The concepts generated an intensified process of meaning making, inviting me to see more, hear more, think more deeply. It was also the first experience that pulled me in during my three months at Stanford. It helped that Elliot seemed comfortable with my thickly accented, high-paced English (his appreciation for my English contrasted with my encounter at the grocery store several hours earlier where the same English left the cashiers baffled). Elliot welcomed me to Stanford, to the community of education, with genuine interest, generosity, and an intensity that was as aesthetic as it was intellectual. I came back to the seminar every subsequent Monday.

December 1982, a time of decisions: Motivated by the need to find a structure and community, I was trying to decide between a doctorate in musicology or music performance, where neither felt particularly appealing. I remember Elliot calling me at home (Yoram picked up the phone), suggesting we talk. The following day in his office, he offered me a research assistantship in a newly funded Getty Center project. Surprised, I explained to him that I had no degrees and background in education, that, in fact, I did not know anything about education. Elliot reassured me that I would be fine, and that my degrees in philosophy and musicology would count. Skeptical, but distinctly flattered and excited, I plunged.

And a plunge it was. In a visit to a 5th grade classroom, a few weeks later, I was confronted with my own ignorance through the assignment of writing a case-study of that classroom. I did not exaggerate when I said I knew nothing about education. Lacking rudimentary concepts (e.g., curriculum, pedagogy) I had no clue what to focus on. Elliot's other four doctoral students were busy writing as I sat there, paralyzed with ignorance. Almost half an hour through the class, it dawned on me that I could use musical dimensions, basic aspects of my background, as conceptual organizers. The operational curriculum assumed meaning as I

attended to the *form* of the class, its *rhythm, dynamics, orchestration, melody, and counterpoint*. In Elliot's *Cognition and Curriculum* (Eisner, 1982), he quotes art historian Ernst Gombrich in driving home the point that the artist does not paint what he sees, but sees what he can paint. I could attend to classroom life through fundamental musical concepts. I was not familiar with Elliot's notion of connoisseurship and educational criticism, but in retrospect what I was doing fitted well with these notions. Elliot found my ideas worthwhile and gave me space to draw on my own sensitivities and curiosities, space to play with ideas, conceptualizations, and meaning making. It was a luxurious and compelling introduction to my career as a researcher. For my part, making the strange classroom familiar allowed me to make the familiar concepts strange, to appreciate their ability to deal with the temporality of lived experience.

As a student I did not fully recognize or grasp the impact that Elliot had on my thinking. I could see our differences; my own interests in anthropological research and emic perspectives, my wariness of the notion of expertise (and yes, it was Elliot who said that "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing," acknowledging the limitations of expertise). Only after I graduated could I comprehend the extent of his influence; my interest in arts curricula, the shaping of consciousness and reflection on cultural and institutional values, and my fascination with what the arts teach us about inquiry and research. Beyond specific directions, Elliot provided a powerful model of engaging his audiences, large and small. I still remember his AERA presidential address where we were all tearful as he invoked poetry and film to drive home deeply educational messages. I remember teaching with him and Tom Barone in Palo Alto in one of his arts-based research classes. He was powerfully present, connected to ideas and people, always full of vitality, even when his illness was debilitating.

Elliot created a community of his former and present students, as we gathered every AERA and NAEA over food and drinks and good conversations. He was genuinely and intensely interested in each of us, in our careers and perspectives on the field and our families. Our last meeting, when Ellie and Elliot took me to lunch in May 2013 in San Francisco, was memorable. Elliot was struggling with his health, but was as animated as ever. As he ambled toward his car, parked next to a store displaying colorful socks, I was drawn to a whimsical pair of green knee-highs with a butterfly design. I hesitated, not wanting to delay him and Ellie, but Elliot insisted that when you saw something that really called you, you should go for it. I got two pairs, one green and the other black, which I now think of as my "Elliot socks." They reflect his aesthetic, imaginative, playful, and vividly dynamic spirit.

As many current and former students have heard about Elliot's death and have written to me, he is very much alive in my thinking and being (the title of Tom Barone's book *Touching Eternity*, about an inspiring Appalachian teacher and great teachers in general, often comes to

mind). And returning to Elliot's nets and fish in the opening quotation, it was the combination of his ideas and his personality that inspired me to expand in ways I never expected, to weave new nets and capture new kinds of fish. I am grateful for having met him, having been drawn into his circle, shown by example how academia can be a place of vitality, creativity, and joy in connecting to and creating multiple communities: a place of the mind, heart, and spirit.

References

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About the author

Liora Bresler is a Professor at the College of Education, the University of Illinois, Champaign. She is also the Hedda Anderson Chair in Lund University, Sweden (Visiting); a Professor II at Stord/Haugesund University College, Norway; and an Honorary Professor in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Bresler has published 120+ papers and book chapters and has written and edited several books on the arts in education, including the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Springer, 2007), *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds* (Kluwer, 2004), and the co-edited *International Handbook of Creative Learning* (Routledge, 2011); and *The International Handbook of the Arts in Education* (Routledge, in press/2014). Bresler is the editor of the book series "Landscapes: Aesthetics, the arts and education" (Springer). Bresler has given keynote speeches, invited talks, seminars and short courses in 35 countries in Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa and the Americas. Her work has been translated to German, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Finnish, Korean, and Chinese.

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